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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the most appropriate books for elementary education are those that are the best that children can learn to read. The author suggests that many schools have problems teaching students to enjoy reading because the teachers too often attempt to teach from inferior school texts rather than from books that are worthy of study that is, books which are worth re-reading and which inspire reflective thought, within a course of study that should be enjoyable in itself. The author states that too often school textbooks cheapen and sully the students' learning, that only an education based on the great books provides the substance of a real education. Schoolbook culture, it is contended, offers no valid entry into the real world because it too often excludes the study of serious works of literary art. A genuine education would not only expose children at an early age to the great books but it would also treat writing as an art rather than as a set of mechanical skills to be mastered. (Author/DI)

Landor

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DISCOURSE: THE PRIMARY LANGUAGE

Although words say more than can be brought under completely rational control, the integrity of language is guarded by the rigor of its discipline. A lawyer and a poet both understand the importance of a comma. Here is a point of seriousness at which education can begin: what can be read at all can be read accurately. Learning to read accurately is the modest but indispensable beginning of elementary education.*

Nothing in the current practice of American pedagogy has enraged parents more than The Reading Problem. They see this as an intellectual crime and they see their children as the victims. School authorities, on the other hand, are inclined to throw this problem back into the parents' laps and blame the home environment. As a Director of Guidance and Counseling in the Riverside County (California) schools defined the problem: "The chief cause, as we all know, is due to emotional disturbances at home." Parental protests about reading are seen as contumacious of School authority and threatening

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* The student should learn to respect all the particularities of language. Good pronunciation, legible handwriting, correct spelling may be social assets in some circles, liabilities in others. But regardless of their class or caste use, they help conduct meaning to its exact destination.

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to Schoolbook publishers' profits. But it is not improbable that there is a causal relation between the quality of books used in the schools and the quality of reading taught there.

The appropriate books for elementary education are those that are the best that children can learn to read. They will never learn anything more proportionately productive in their intellectual life than the rudiments of reading — but they will never learn to read well with inferior books. Learning to read is a paradigm of the educational process; learning to read first-rate books is a logical extension of reading's generative power.*

Education is unashamedly centered in the book. "Democratic society is a daughter of books," wrote Ortega y Gasset, "the triumph of the book written by man...over the book of laws dictated by the

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The rudiments (or "mechanics") of reading should be taught by a method that assumes a fundamental relation between the way that words sound and the way they are spelled.

Leonard Bloomfield and Clarence L. Barnhart, Let's Read: A Linguistic Approach, (Wayne State University Press, 1961) describes an effective method for teaching the rudiments of reading.

For an expert evaluation of the Schoolbook in the study and teaching of English on the secondary school level, see: James J. Lynch and Bertrand Evans, High School English Textbooks: A Critical Examination, (Little, Brown, 1963).

See also: Joanne S. Chall, Learning to Read: The Great Debate, (Mc-Graw-Hill, 1967).

autocracy." By learning how to read a book well a student learns something of the ways to distinguish sober from snap judgment; he learns to look for the pertinent evidence and to find the jugular issue; he learns that an iron opinion is not a proof. There is a significant difference between learning how to read a book and learning how to read the signs of one's life or the life of the times, but it seems probable that there is a live connection between them. That reading (reading!) should so tax the competence of the schools that teaching it well proves difficult or impossible is a not insignificant sign of the intellectual abyss into which they have fallen.

The average School principal can relate numerous "reasons" why an apparently intelligent child in the Sixth Grade of his school is reading at the Third Grade level.* (These levels are themselves

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There is an ominously voluminous literature on the rudiments of reading instruction. One work cites over a hundred "causes" of reading difficulty, the most thought-provoking of which is "undescended testicles".

In "Let's Be Practical about Reading", an article in the August-September 1969 issue of American Education (published by the U. S. Office of Education) the use of an elaborate medical terminology (e.g., "early diagnosis and treatment", "reading clinics", "reading disabilities", "corrective techniques", "remedial help", "seriously disabled readers", "intensive diagnosis", "prescriptive teachings") suggests that the mere fact of a child learning to read puts him, at best, among the walking wounded and, at worst, among the victims of plague.

It declares, in words that speak for virtually the entire corps of reading experts: "No one method works for all children."

"The reading teacher," it goes on to say, "uses a variety of techniques to stimulate language and learning." For example, "he might use a rock collection or a trip to the natural history museum to build vocabulary and other reading skills." Additional "techniques" recommended are:

wholly inadequate, but that's another issue.) But he will never be heard to say that the system itself is in any way at fault. The teachers are "educated", "dedicated", and "experienced"; the "basal" readers have been produced by blue-ribbon committees of reading experts; and the school has a Remedial Reading Clinic for those students whose "negative family factors" may be showing. The reasons given by School officials for the all-too-common reading difficulties of school students may appear mysterious and unconvincing to the uninitiated; but the unhappy results of School incompetence in this crucial matter of reading instruction have become increasingly manifest to all except confirmed School apologists.

If a student is to develop an expectation of pleasure and profit from reading, his experience in the classroom must help accustom him to it. The books must be good and the discussion about them

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"puppets, toys, and language development materials [books?]". This current dictum from the castle keep of American education predictably concludes that "definitive research on specific aspects of how individuals learn to read must yet be done."

Other nations appear to find teaching the rudiments of reading a relatively simple educational problem. The fundamental cause of the Great American Reading Problem is not in the American school student, who is as intelligent and able as students elsewhere, but in the methods used to teach him. Problems tend to become insoluble in proportion to the inappropriateness of the means employed to solve them.

must be lively and competently led. There is, unfortunately, nothing about a Schoolbook or a typical Schoolroom discussion to encourage this expectation. The schools neglect the best reading machine ever invented. A good book is the secret weapon of education. It has not been, nor is it likely to be, rendered obsolete by any School hardware presently in sight. Teaching students how to read and to discuss a first-rate book is the heart of education at any level. What could be more of a truism — or a truth that the Schools more unaccountably slight?

It may be that the schools do not rightly see how to decide upon the first-rate. The notion may seem presumptuous. It may suggest some kind of undemocratic hierarchy. But it is difficult to understand how this ordering by rank is to be avoided in the educational process. A selection of some kind must be made. The quality of what students learn to read appears a not implausible guage of the quality of their education. Trying to teach students to read well apart from the influence and example of the members of this hierarchy is not only disrespectful but impracticable.

The judgment as to which are the works that are most appropriate for study at each level of learning must be open to continual question. One can only confront present responsibility with present wisdom. There is no fixed canon, but it seems reasonable to suppose

that certain literary achievements have, as it were, substantial tenure, and that certain works are more suitable for study at one level of intellectual maturity than at another. The most searching questions can find their occasion anywhere, in any event, at any time. But learning at its best requires something better than inferior or ephemeral materials.

Moreover, when the content is inferior, it cannot be taken up in a way that is decisive. Since learning to give close attention to what is important is a primary aim of education, students must be provided works of study that have the power to compel, as well as the merit to deserve, such attention. More often than not, the occasion of learning will be provided principally by the merit of the work — whether a poem, essay, piece of music, mathematical idea, or painting — under consideration. The intellectual and esthetic value of individual works of liberal art are not incidental to their educational value. A frozen list of Classics can be as deadly to the spirit of genuine education as any other doctrinaire approach. But keeping this caution well in mind, where else should the schools look for the source and substance of intellectual and imaginative power if not in individual works of art?

Adults can learn something from second-rate or third-rate work, so long as they supply their own irony toward it. But children are deficient in irony. Irony is a privilege of distance, of transcendence, of maturity. No transcendence, no irony. We cannot in good conscience give a child the third-rate and leave it to his

irony to transcend it.

But are typical Schoolbooks third-rate? Perhaps they are seventh or eighth-rate. It becomes too nice a point. There is a difference of quality between the Schoolbook and an individual work of literary art that requires each to be considered on a different kind of scale from the other. If Homer and Shakespeare — or even the best of children's literature — are first-rate, where would that leave Dick and Jane? Ninety-eighth-rate? One hundred and sixty-fourth rate? In comparison with works of literary art, Schoolbooks are non-ratable. Schoolteachers who gladly teach with the non-ratable produce non-students.

The quality of the book that a teacher is competent to teach is a measure of his art. But a Schoolbook has too little power to measure this competence. "The beautiful bare text for me," writes Robert Frost in one of his letters. "Teachers who don't know what to do with it, let them perish and lose their jobs." Even a great book can be ruined for a class by a poor teacher; as even a superb teacher, forced to use Schoolbooks, cannot teach much above them.

If a great book is the criterion by which other books are measured, by what criterion are Schoolbooks measured? In School they are measured by School criteria. "But they measuring themselves

by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise." That a writer's greatness is recognizable by the artistry with which he handles important themes is one-half of literary culture's notorious leap into circularity; the other half is that we are more able to recognize that a theme is important when a great writer has opened our eyes to its significance.

One generation's elegance may be another's museum piece. A work once thought great may have become merely a relic. "Some of the ancient poets", said Frost, "whose names are known and there's nothing to show for it....The poems had no value, but it looks as if they had because they survived....Some things survive by just luck....So time isn't a sure judge any more than anything else is." There is no sure judge. Yet the judgment must be made. The criterion by which we make our judgment must be the same that we apply to any work, ancient or modern. Education shouldn't have to waste its reverence upon works that may once have spoken to the condition of a living generation but that do so no longer. In selecting appropriate materials for a liberal education, "Taos is a tightrope" that the educator must walk between works that have an immediately powerful impact but clearly no lasting value and those whose reputations have endured beyond their deserving.

Most books that survive the passage of time do so by more than just luck. "They" [great books] writes Lionel Trilling,

"exist in the lively milieu that is created by the responses that have long been given to them. For centuries they have been loved and admired and considered and interpreted and quarrelled over — and used, used. Some part of their reality consists in the way they have figured in the life of the world, certainly in the intellectual life of the world, a large part of which is constituted by what has been said about them." It is incredible that the schools are so indifferent to the questions, Which are the good and great books? When and how should they be introduced into the curriculum? But it is not incredible that, being indifferent to these questions, they fail.

The close relation between learning the language of discourse and the quality of the books used to teach it is illustrated by the teaching method of the eighteenth century philosopher Johann Georg Hamann, to whom, a study of his contribution to language theory declares, "language instruction was the occasion for immediate encounter with the best a language has to offer; hence, it was but natural that Shakespeare was regarded as the gateway to English." He tutored Herder in English by beginning with Hamlet. This is not to suggest that we should use the same beginning with school children. But it might not be a bad idea to begin their reading and continue it according to Hamann's principle, as it might be applied at each

step along the way.

A good education would teach reflective reading. Speed reading is for executives. Every book in the curriculum ought to be good enough to justify at least two readings. Reform of reading in the schools might do worse than begin by adopting the principle that only books that deserve and require to be read more than once should be read even once. How many Schoolbooks would pass this test?

The books from which we learn most are not necessarily those which are hardest to read. The answer to the problem of educating Everychild is not to turn the schools into intellectual sweatshops. Those books that make the deepest imprint on heart and mind may be the ones we tend to gallop, not trudge, through; or we might read them longingly, savoringly, reluctant to come to their end.* The teachers we remember as teaching us best were not necessarily the hardest taskmasters. Some good experiences of life can only be taken with grace, ease, delight, and no sweat.

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* In the early grades, fairy tales should play a prominent part. Good fairy tales are a wonderful introduction to reality. The child learns to his horror and delight, that a house with a gingerbread roof and spun-sugar windows (and perhaps even color TV) may be presided over by a smiler with nasty inclinations. But it is only as an adult that he will be able to perceive how genuine and powerful (in their unbowdlerized versions) were the myths and fairy tales of his childhood. He will encounter many a myth in his life that will not serve him half as well. "Fairyland," wrote Chesterton, "is nothing but the sunny country of commonsense."

This is the kind of education that anyone would want, if he could get it — a course of study that is good enough to be enjoyed for itself. It is not fantastic that a school student should want to read a good book because of the pleasure of its company. A student with a particular interest in any part of the curriculum should be put in the way of good things in it, to indulge himself to his heart's content. If all that a teacher sees for his students in reading a good book is that the better it is, the "harder" it is — and the more promising an occasion to convert it into an exercise at trivial labor — he's obviously a stranger to the pleasure of reading and therefore unqualified to teach it.*

According to School experts, children should read only the books that they have already proved, by reading other books with similar vocabulary, that they can "cover". This poses the question, How can children ever get past that first good book, which is

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* If good paperbacks were used extensively in the schools, they could be given gratis to the students at a cheaper cost to the State or School district than providing the use of hard-cover Schoolbooks. If students owned the books required by the curriculum, they would be able to underline, comment upon, analyze more closely, what they were reading; it would also give them a start in building a good book collection of their own. Physical possession of books might be one of the preliminaries to their intellectual possession.

sure to be at least partly over their heads? Given the "reading readiness" assumption, this is a formidable question. It is a question that logically suggests the next one, How can children ever learn to read well at all? (How can Achilles ever catch up to the Tortoise?)

A six year old child of normal intelligence is ready to learn to read. This readiness doesn't need to be taught but must be assumed (unless proved otherwise) as having already been developed in the normal growth of his intelligence. If the readiness to learn to read had to be taught, then perhaps the readiness of readiness would have to be taught also -- and so on. An appropriate degree of maturity is needed to pursue certain subjects and read certain books. "Things growing are not ripe until their season". But in the meantime, there are the studies and books for which the time is now. Each stage of development has its own degree of ripeness. There is never a time in the curriculum that is not ripe for the study of the first-rate that is appropriate to that time.

The acute and chronic fear of teaching above the student's head inhibits the teacher's use of his own intelligence and frustrates the student's need to reach beyond his intellectual grasp. The readability of a book is, to say the least, different from what the experts understand as the readiness of a child to read it.

"Aside from the fact," writes a contemporary author of Beatrix Potter, "that she was not afraid to use quite long words for the very young, if they were just the right words, there is neither prettiness, preciousness, nor sentimentality in her pages. There is even in her books what is quite astonishing when you consider the youth of her readers, a kind of faint irony of expression, a wonderful pithiness, dryness, toughness." With the right words the world becomes, for children as well as for adults, at once new and yet more familiar. If we did not already have some understanding of the world that the writer depicts for us, he could not make it more understandable. But if he succeeded only in putting it in the same light by which we already know it, he would fail to remind us of the world's — and of the word's — power to be astonishingly and everlastingly new.

Schoolbooks fail so dismally to interest the child in reading because they are too familiar — hence, stale; because they remind him of nothing important of which he needs reminding — hence, trite; because they use a castrated diction — hence, sterile. In the circumstances, it should be no great test of ingenuity to understand why the schools do not succeed in teaching school students to read well or to enjoy good books. School seems to be much more intimidated by the possibility that a child will see a word in

print that he does not know than to be interested in the possibility of teaching it to him. So why start him down this scary path of real books where he is likely to encounter unfamiliar words? Schoolbooks are much safer. The School reading experts cannot be accused of being indifferent to emotional factors (however curiously they interpret them), even though careless of intellectual ones.*

Children need a book done by a writer, not a committee. They need a book they will love to read; not a "learning tool"; not a warmed-over Schoolbook whiff of what someone, somewhere, might once have thought or felt. Schoolbook learning is the very name of

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* "The effects of a reading program based upon a restricted vocabulary and simplified texts reach into all other parts of the curriculum in the elementary grades. The average child in the fourth grade with a reading vocabulary of 1,500 words must be provided with texts in history, geography, any physical science that do not tax his limited vocabulary and shaky mechanical skills. This means, of course, that the texts are severely restricted in content and that the diction is in a class with that of Dick and Jane....

"The effects of this downgrading are seen most clearly in the teaching of literature. As we have already noted, the problems of achieving simple mechanical skill in reading occupy a major part of the curriculum during the first six grades. The average child who has completed the typical fifth-grade reader has a reading vocabulary in the range of 2,500 words. He has been cut off from the best of children's literature and provided with a kind of subliterary sludge...." (Selma Fraiberg)

unreality. How can we teach children this way and expect them to be interested in learning? How can we educate them this way? Children are as responsive to what is alive, as interested in the genuine and as disaffected by the phony, as their elders. Cheap, attention-getting tricks, like science told as the story of dinosaurs, may succeed in capturing a transient interest. But it's a losing battle. The law of diminishing returns asserts itself. Where can you go but down — from fake science to fake technology, from dinosaurs (Big bellies and little brains are why they disappeared.) to Your Telephone and How It Works? At some point in this process of ersatz learning, the little scholars are no longer with it. Interest is gone. Only their indentured bodies and the mere appearance of attention — just enough to avoid it — remain.

The way to teach a child the language of discourse — in reading, in writing, in speaking, in listening — is to teach him with examples of its power and glory. To say the least, this is not a novel precept. Neither, by any stretch of the imagination, can it be said to be a practiced one in the schools today. "The contemporary scene, "wrote Mark Van Doren in 1943,"is filled with educators who want to protect students from the classics; which they do not burn but which they would keep on the back shelves. Their compassion, almost tearful at moments, is for a generation of youth threatened with

direct exposure to the best spirits that have lived. Such an exposure, they say, imperils health and sanity in the tender and growing mind."

If there were a single justification for the invidious distinction that came to be made in this country during the 1940s and 1950s between "educators" and "educationists," it would be that the former do not, characteristically, fear the influence of good books on children; but that the latter, characteristically, do. Educationists do not burn the great and good books; they substitute Schoolbooks for them. Schoolbooks are watered-down, homogenized, committee-written non-books manufactured for School use. A child would have to be incorrigible to be educated by them.

A school that understood the true nature of education would consider that it had hardly any higher aim than that of making good books of substantial interest to their students. It would consider school years a good time and school a fine place for students to learn to read well and to acquire a taste for the pleasure of reading. That good books are necessary to teach children how to read well, that this is in fact the most important part of education, and that the schools fail miserably in this vital area of their responsibility — all this is old old hat. But only the School establishment ever appears to wonder, Why all the continued fuss about it.*

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* It came as a tremendous revelation a generation ago, that infants

One of the more apocalyptic events in the history of the American Schoolbook occurred about a decade ago in California when the State Printer burned a large number of them — unfortunately, by mistake. The intentional burning of Schoolbooks would be inspiring. Books that are really books would immediately become held in greater esteem. Children would learn that not everything that looks like a book is a book. It would be an object lesson in the crucial distinction between appearance and reality. A little child would ask his teacher, What is a book? Inevitably, the question would come up, What is a good book? Education would be on its way.

Schoolbooks enter the learning experience of the child only to cheapen and dull it. They put the School blight on learning before it has fairly begun. Schoolbooks are written for the School market. If there were no School, who would publish the kind of books that are used there? On the one hand, there is the world of Schoolbooks; and, on the other, there is the world of real art, real thought, real imagination, which are the substance of a real education. Two dis-

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need physical affection as an essential part of their well-being. Babies need to be loved! What a discovery — or rediscovery — at this stage of human history! Obviously, there is a mint to be mined in the obvious. That good teachers using good books are a potent educational combination can hardly lay claim to being an original notion. But in present educational circumstances, it can make a fair claim to the necessity of being rediscovered.

tinct cultures: School versus Education.

To sharpen and brighten the edge of existence; to make time pay dearly so that when death comes, it is no mean loss — this is the possibility that art demonstrates. A work of liberal art is language that governs; it is a criterion. Insofar as education is remote from individual works of art, it is remote from the sovereign centers of learning; it is Schooling, not education.

Every serious reading of a work of art is, at once, a study of its individual meaning and worth; a study of the art it represents; a study of the language in which it is expressed; and a study of the "reality", existential or esthetic, with which it connects. The reading of a work of art in the writing of history is also a study of the art of historical writing, of the language of discourse, and of the way in which this work penetrates to an historical reality.

The destiny of a work of art is to endure; the fate of a Schoolbook is to become obsolete. As a consequence, there are in the main two fundamentally different, fundamentally opposed, kinds of "education", each based upon the kind of book that is most characteristic of it. Works of literary art relate the student to the real world, as Schoolbooks do not; they satisfy a thirst for the genuine and unalloyed, as Schoolbooks cannot.

School has devised its own materials of study and its own

standards of judgment in respect to them. The student who knows only this culture is excluded from the reality of which genuine art is the expression. Schoolbook culture lacks the crucial enabling property of esthetic truth. There's no poetry in it. A Schoolbook is no valid entry into a real world.

Youngsters are dependent on the integrity and competence of their educators to introduce them to criteria that must be taken seriously. Students have the right to expect, from the First Grade, that they shall be initiated into a world of validity, and that they will not have to waste the school years of their lives getting ready for the genuine article. The individual work of art is a bridge to the real world. But the schools have criteria, methods, materials all of their own. This is the secret of their failure. They are a bridge to nowhere.

Schoolbooks are written only for School. Works of literary art are written for — well, who can tell exactly for whom they are written, or why? Kierkegaard wrote his books for his "single reader". The usual motive for writing a Schoolbook is a publisher's contract. But a serious writer has a story to tell, an idea to explore. He may think well or poorly of his book; have written it in jest, desperation, hunger, or drunkenness. However, motive aside, we are obliged to take his work seriously if it exem-

plifies the beauty and power of genuine speech. We should no more allow cheap-jack Schoolbooks to be used in the education of children than we would allow a moron as their classroom teacher.

The Writing Problem is closely allied to The Reading Problem. In his essay, "Of Education", John Milton refers to the method of teaching writing to school students of his time as "a preposterous exaction, forcing...children to compose Theams...which are the acts of ripest judgment and...long reading and observing...." In our own time the favorite School formula is: write write write —— correct correct correct -- grade grade grade. It tries to take by pedantic storm what can be won only as the result of a slowly ripening response to literary art, to linguistic study, and to life. "Long reading, and observing." There is also a world to know. The world catches one's eye, as only a world can. A writer reads the world, his text; and his book, if it is good, is a good reading of it. In this reading he tries his strength; art is a way of disputing vital points at issue.

Learning to write is learning precision, economy of style, and the grace to have something to say before the effort is made to say it; it is learning the rules and principles that govern written usage in order to speak in one's own unique voice; it is learning the way of being honest about the relation between words and reality;

it is learning to state as is, as ought, as if, convincingly; it is learning to overcome jargon, cliché, and other varieties of neat, colorless, and efficient death. The ghosts that range the self impersonating the life that language takes to live reassure us because they are so familiar despite the emptiness of their substance, but images of death they are.

Writing is not only a technique, which can be taught; it is also an art, which cannot. The art of writing, like the arts of humor or love, cannot be studied as one studies the life cycle of a worm. That's the way a worm would study it. It is a reading, it is a prayer, it is a note to the milkman. But it is not a Schoolbook study, unless the human spirit is too. True or false, grammatical or ungrammatical, funny or grave, writing as an art is measurable, if not measured, by the single law of the art that it exemplifies — and poets are its truest prophets.

~~If discourse is the primary language of man, poetry is the blaze~~ ~~of [illegible] should devour it entire.~~ In poetry the student learns the discipline of thought and the exultation of song in one. He learns — what would be to Monsieur Jourdain's even greater astonishment — that we speak poetry in our more living speech. Poetry is a rhythmic content, conciseness, and compression of language, encompassing its richest associations.

Referring to the time when children were taught to commit poetry to memory (Rote is the pejorative term that covers a multitude of educational virtues.), an editorial in a literary review declares: "Unlike many modern children, they had something elegant, precise and significant to fall back upon. they had their models of wit or feeling, of reflection or passion, of foolishness or wisdom. They had indeed their touchstones of taste." What are the schools using these days for touchstones of taste? If they are interested, as they should be, in teaching their students something of the power of language that a good poet has, what better way than teaching them good poetry, from the First Grade? By getting to know the most powerful sources of linguistic power, the student may acquire the means of following in hot pursuit. Who can doubt that Everychild has the power of poetry in him, and that a real education would help him find and develop it?